UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1996/10
8 March 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fourth session
18 April-3 May 1996

Demographic dynamics and sustainability

Report of the Secretary-General

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96-05826 (E) 120396 220396

INTRODUCTION

1. At its third session, in 1995, the Commission on Sustainable Development recognized "that chapter 5 of Agenda 21 and chapter III of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development reinforce one another, and together form a comprehensive and compelling up-to-date account as to what needs to be done about the interface among population, environment and sustainable development". 1/

2. The present document reports on progress in the implementation of the objectives of those chapters. It was prepared by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in consultation with the United Nations Secretariat, in accordance with arrangements agreed to by the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development at its fourth session. It is the result of consultations and information exchanges between designated focal points in United Nations agencies, governmental officials and a number of other institutions and individuals.

3. The closely related nature of most of the issues taken up in two other recent conferences, the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, March 1995) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, September 1995) ensures that observations pertaining to chapter 5 of Agenda 21 and chapter III of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) also weigh on many of the issues discussed at those conferences.

4. The present report will focus on factors which have been found to exert a significant influence on demographic variables and on population and sustainable development policies in general.

I. POLICIES, ACTIONS AND TRENDS

A. Country experiences

5. The most widely accepted view today among experts holds that levels of population, of consumption patterns and the nature of technology are the three major factors which determine the effects of development on the environment. 2/ This view is generally shared by Governments, as reflected in the recommendations and action programmes of the international conferences of recent times, including those referred to above. In chapter 5 of Agenda 21 it is said that the "growth of world population and production combined with unsustainable consumption patterns places increasingly severe stress on the life-supporting capacities of our planet". 3/

6. This idea is embellished in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. "Efforts to slow down population growth, to reduce poverty, to achieve economic progress, to improve environmental protection, and to reduce unsustainable consumption and production patterns are mutually reinforcing." 4/ Further recognizing that "the ultimate goal is the improvement of the quality of life of present and future

generations, the objective is to facilitate the demographic transition as soon as possible in countries where there is an imbalance between demographic rates and social, economic and environmental goals, while fully respecting human rights. This process will contribute to the stabilization of the world population, and, together with changes in unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, to sustainable development and economic growth." 5/

7. In this context both governmental commitment and gender equity are very important to the promotion of a sustainable balance between population and environment and to the achievement of sustainable development in general. Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action both require governmental commitment for their success, and the Programme of Action recognizes the status of women and girls as important to the demographic transition and to the achievement of sustainable development.

8. As part of its monitoring activities, the UNFPA Task Force on ICPD Implementation (see para. 29 below) solicited answers to a series of questions sent to some 120 field offices, covering more than 130 countries. Seventy-eight replies had been received by the time this report was written. Although the answers did not lend themselves to quantitative or numerical analysis, they nevertheless provided much valuable information.

9. In the great majority of countries from which information was received, the Conference had given the population question a prominence it had rarely or ever enjoyed before. Generally, greater importance is being attached to population questions and to the need to integrate population factors into environment and development planning.

10. Some countries have planned and/or initiated population policies; many have started or rejuvenated population programmes, and new governmental institutions have been established to deal with population issues. A major task for most countries is to apply the concept of reproductive health as defined in the Programme of Action, usually by integrating the traditional maternal and child health/family planning approach (MCH/FP) into the new and more comprehensive reproductive health/family planning approach (RH/FP) of the Conference.

11. National commitment is also reflected in efforts directed at improving the quality of care. The importance of providing choice of methods is also gaining increased recognition.

12. Aspects of demography that have recently received more attention in many countries include questions of gender equity and equality, activities aimed at adolescents, and attempts to involve males in reproductive health and family planning programmes.

13. The Conference called for gender equity and equality in the design and implementation of population programmes, as in other areas of social, economic and political life. In most countries a process of accommodation is going on between traditional values and mores and the intentions of the recommendations from international conferences like ICPD.

14. Information, education and communication activities (IEC) are at the root of every successful population programme, although only about a third of the responding countries could be said to have a full-fledged IEC strategy.

15. A salient feature of both the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and the International Conference on Population and Development was the strong and influential participation of non-governmental organizations. Some non-governmental organizations play a major role in the implementation of their country's population policies.

16. Although a majority of countries now place greater emphasis on population policies, there are a number of obstacles to more rapid progress. Socio-cultural factors and the implied contrast between tradition and modernity can have an important bearing on activities in the population field. Although such questions may require the passage of time to be fully resolved, IEC and other population strategies can be helpful.

17. Effective institutional arrangements, especially in the public sector, are also important. In many countries, however, the shift from the relatively simpler MCH/FP approach to the more complex and multisectoral RH/FP strategy is proving difficult. New levels of cooperation and coordination, changes in the institutions themselves, and sufficiently trained and experienced personnel are critical to success. The shortage of the latter may be the single most important obstacle to more rapid progress.

18. Insufficient domestic financial resources and even outright economic hardship have in many countries placed severe limits on the range and scope of activities. Not only has this led to a general curtailment of activities but also risks a serious imbalance between resources spent on trained, experienced personnel and resources spent on programme-related activities. The need for international resources remains high (see the section below on finance).

B. Non-governmental organizations

19. Although baseline data are not readily available, the number of non-governmental organizations in the fields of environment and development which also include population concerns in their activities has probably increased in the wake of UNCED and ICPD. Of 1,254 non-governmental organizations accredited by the ECOSOC to participate in ICPD, most focused solely on population and health issues. From the remainder, some 140, selected for their focus on environment and development as well as population, were sent a questionnaire for this report.

20. Twenty-four organizations responded, including international, national, regional and local or community organizations from all major regions. They included women's groups, youth groups, environmental groups, community groups and family planning groups.

21. Nearly all the respondents saw the provision of information and the development of public awareness as principal tasks. While they acknowledged the importance of population, environment and development linkages, more than three

quarters maintained that awareness of those linkages in their respective countries was low, and most reported low awareness among non-governmental organizations themselves.

22. Although most of the non-governmental organizations surveyed focus on national and local issues, the responses indicated increasing networking among non-governmental organizations and considerable collaboration across national boundaries, involving international organizations and bilateral and multilateral funding agencies.

23. Non-governmental organization networks, or umbrella associations, are often important capacity-building instruments, providing training, exchanges of institutional experience, information etc.

24. As part of the process of integrating the contributions of major groups and non-governmental organizations into the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. UNFPA has established an advisory committee which has helped to shape UNFPA's own strategies since the Conference.

C. Finance

25. It is still too early to make an evaluation of domestic flows of resources for population policies and programmes since the Conference. The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development envisages that the developing countries themselves will, on average, provide about two thirds of the resources necessary; it also makes clear that not all countries can be expected to provide so much from domestic resources.

26. To finance the population portion of the Programme of Action, international flows of resources need to increase in amounts stipulated at the Conference, and a growing number of donor countries have in fact pledged increased overall support. Additional resources are urgently needed to satisfy unmet needs.

27. UNFPA provides in excess of 80 per cent of multilateral grants for population policies. From 1994 to 1995 UNFPA's income increased by 16 per cent, and the target for 1996 is $325 million. The World Bank and, increasingly, the regional development banks, are the principal sources of population loans and credits. In 1993 the World Bank made available about $344 million for population purposes, the second largest amount since 1984. Overall international assistance to the population field increased from $972 million in 1990 to $1,310 million in 1993. Data for later years are not yet available.

D. International cooperation

28. Recent efforts aimed at closer integration of population variables into United Nations system activities have followed essentially two trends:

(a) Institutional reorganization to better accommodate the population issue;

(b) Introducing population factors to a wider spectrum of issues and programme areas. 6/

29. One of the most significant initiatives undertaken in the field of United Nations system cooperation was the establishment in late 1994 of the Inter-Agency Task Force on ICPD Implementation, headed by UNFPA's Executive Director. In November 1995 it was renamed the ACC Task Force on Basic Social Services for All. The Task Force has prepared and disseminated a set of guidelines for the United Nations Resident Coordinator system and developed a common advocacy statement on population and development.

30. At its third session, the Commission on Sustainable Development recommended that the Economic and Social Council "examine how to ensure synergy and cooperation between the Commission on Sustainable Development and the Commission on Population and Development". 7/ The Council, at its substantive session of 1995, pledged, in cooperation with the functional commissions, to "ensure a better division of labour among them and coordination among their multi-year programmes" and to "clarify the particular forms under which common themes should be considered by them". 8/

II. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

31. UNCED and ICPD were important agents of change. Both - especially ICPD - fashioned new ways of approaching population questions and problems. They also gave greater visibility to the critical linkages between population issues and developmental and environmental issues. The extent to which action on those linkages will be taken will depend in no small measure on the financial resources made available, nationally and internationally.

32. In view of the information provided in this report and keeping in mind the long-term nature of the actions implied in the recommendations made at its third session in 1995, the Commission might wish to:

(a) Urge Governments to continue to support research on the linkages between population, poverty, consumption and production, environment and national resources, education and health as a guide to effective sustainable development;

(b) Recognize the importance of the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of sustainable development planning and programmes and urge Governments to take all steps necessary to bring such participation to fruition, and in so doing urge Governments to incorporate fully the recommendations contained in the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action; 9/

(c) Urge Governments to pay full attention to the importance of institution-building in the field of population, environment and development, with a view to achieving the prompt integration of population concerns into sustainable development planning and policies, and to the efficient implementation of Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development;

(d) Encourage Governments to formulate and implement effective IEC strategies in the field of population, environment, and sustainable development, thereby creating the necessary conditions for the rapid achievement of the goals of Agenda 21 and the ICPD Programme of Action;

(e) Invite Governments to involve the private sector and civil society, including non-governmental organizations, in the implementation of the recommendations of Agenda 21 and the ICPD Programme of Action and of those contained in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme for Action 10/ and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action;

(f) Urge all Governments to commit to the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action financial resources that are commensurate with the provisions of chapters XIII and XIV of the Programme.

33. The Commission might like to reiterate the invitation issued at its third session to the Commission on Population and Development, to prepare at reasonable intervals, with the assistance of UNDP, UNFPA, UNEP and other relevant institutions, a report on populations at risk because of environmental degradation.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 12 (E/1995/32), para. 84.

2/ See Poverty and the Environment. Reconciling Short-term Needs with Long-term Sustainability Goals (Nairobi, United Nations Environment Programme, 1995).

3/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I. Resolutions adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), resolution 1, annex II, para. 5.3.

4/ Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.XIII.7), chap. I, resolution 1, annex, para. 3.14.

5/ Ibid., para. 6.3.

6/ See E/CN.17/1996/10/Add.1 for further details on activities within the United Nations system.

7/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 12 (E/1995/32), para. 96.

8/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Fiftieth Session, Supplement No. 3 (A/50/3/Rev.1), chap. III, para. 22, I.C.

9/ "Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995" (A/CONF.177/20), chap. I.

10/ "Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995" (A/CONF.166/9), chap. I.